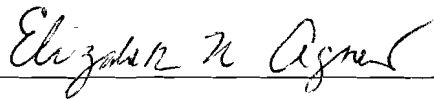


# **The Same Hesitant Rhythm**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By  
Brittany Decker Kusserow

Thesis Advisor  
Dr. Elizabeth Agnew



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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Elizabeth Agnew", is positioned above a horizontal line.

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## **In the Beginning**

*To the many who speak the names of God in different tongues, to the many who view ideas of God in different ways, to those who are courageous enough to doubt the existence of a higher power or powers, to those who are courageous enough to ask the hard questions – let there be peace in the unknowing. Let there be peace in the journey when the journey seems hopeless. Let time work in ways which we do not understand, in ways which are not linear, which are separated yet intertwined. Let us cling to the moments in which we feel the presence of something greater. Let us grasp desperately at straws and through that desperation, find despair. Let us turn despair into hope, and hope into acceptance. Let us wait until we have those moments again.*

When I first came to Ball State University in the fall of 2004, I intended to major in Telecommunications. Three semesters and countless credit hours later, something changed my mind, something inexplicable came over me in the pouring rain by the Bell Tower. I became a major in the field of Religious Studies. Not to learn the ins-and-outs of any one particular tradition, not to proselytize or evangelize, but to take a greedy sample of as much of the world's religious diversity as I could, inside and outside of the classroom. While here I have furthered a still-limited knowledge of Unitarian Universalist traditions, Christian and Jewish practice, and multiple spiritual ideologies of the Native American people of the southwest. My curiosity has been piqued attempting to understand tenets of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Islam... I have also learned of and studied religions I never before knew existed, such as the Baha'i faith. My own Christian upbringing has come into personal question and close scrutiny numerous times.

These four years have passed remarkably quickly, and yet my final steps are anxious ones. I am anxious to complete this phase of my life and move to the next. Because I think it is time that others learned from me, and I from them. Because faith is mystifying, frustrating, and redeeming to so many people in so many places. Because there is so much more in this world to be witnessed, and I am so young, and so able.

This book would not be possible without the continuous support of my family. My parents, Hans and Karen Kusserow allowed me the freedom in college to change my mind – a concept I take for granted which is not an option for everyone. I also owe thanks to my fiancée, New Zealand native Joanna Kyle, for forcing me to write on days when I felt like doing absolutely everything *but* writing – and for showing me through her own vibrancy that same deep spiritual yearning that drew me to the study of religion in the first place. She is my opposite and my equal, my support as I am hers. We meet in the middle as partners. *Kanohi ki te kanohi*. Finally, gratitude must be expressed and extended to Professor Elizabeth Agnew, my advisor, past professor, and, dare I say it, friend. Her insights and guidance during this sometimes hectic process have been highly appreciated and widely employed in what is (finally) the final product.

*Let time work in ways which we do not understand, in ways which are not linear, which are separated yet intertwined.* Time, in regard to the creation of this project, has proved to me to be more linear than I had hoped. Time is coming to an End. A New Time is Beginning. As I write this, I have four chapters unwritten, and little time with which to complete them! But that, too, is the point, it is the whole point – that time is precious and fleeting and perhaps infinite in

ways beyond our knowing. The pieces fit together out of order, the pieces fit together in their own concept of time. The following twelve chapters span a year – from January to December, but the individual stories have been hand-picked from a decade's worth of months and years, of time. Order becomes irrelevant. One of Joanna's brothers puts a damper on family puzzle night by pocketing the last piece just so he can complete the picture at his leisure, and be the one who finishes the project. So read "The Same Hesitant Rhythm" however you wish. Read it "out of order." Read it "in order," it makes no difference – the puzzle will be completed in its own time, in your time, and only you have full charge of how that happens. Taihoa ka kite!

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## The Same Hesitant Rhythm

### Table of Contents

#### Abstract/Preface: In The Beginning

January .....	1
February .....	6
March .....	12
April .....	21
May .....	24
June .....	29
July .....	38
August .....	42
September .....	47
October .....	50
November .....	54
December .....	59
Works Cited .....	65

## January

*"On his way back from the K'un-lun Mountains, the Yellow Emperor lost the dark pearl of Tao. He sent Knowledge to find it, but Knowledge was unable to understand it. He sent Distant Vision, but Distant Vision was unable to see it. He sent Eloquence, but Eloquence was unable to describe it. Finally, he sent Empty Mind, and Empty Mind came back with the pearl."*  
-Chuang-tse

*"'But what does that have to do with vinegar?' asked Pooh."*  
-Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh*

After our first Christmas together, life lapsed back into the comfortable lull of an extremely boring cohabitation for my fiancée, Jo, and me. By that I mean, I went to classes each day as she slowly went mad living in a cramped apartment with nothing to do and nowhere to go. She couldn't work during this stay, she is a New Zealand citizen and her work visa had expired when the camp where I met her closed for fall. At least at first, snow had amazed her. She had never before seen it, and she compared tilting flurries to dandelion seeds. The beginning of January saw us suited up and tromping at least a mile through campus and across the outskirts to The Sunshine Café, that's how eager she was to experience snow. But soon we couldn't be roused from the couch even to walk to the mailbox. We became sluggish. We all but hibernated.

On especially cold weekends, we'd pull the blinds up to watch snow fall, outside, pressing our noses to the iced glass of the window. We read dozens of books this way, curled up, waiting for Spring's thaw. "When are we going to make a snow angel?" Jo asked, constantly. "Oh." I said. I always forgot until it was too late, or too cold, or too slushy. I couldn't stand how dirty the apartment got when she'd leave her stuff where it landed, so I

grumbled until she glared at me and picked it up. She couldn't stand each day being a replica of the one before, so she announced one afternoon that she was going to learn how to be bored.

She liked Benjamin Hoff's "The Tao of Pooh" and reading it together brought us some warmth despite the dead of winter. "A well-frog cannot imagine the ocean, nor can a summer insect conceive of ice. How then can a scholar understand the Tao? He is restricted by his own learning," she read and nodded. "I like that." I looked over her shoulder at tiny, stark words, and shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so... I mean, it seems a bit harsh. I've been in college for four years, and this is telling me all the vocabulary I've picked up, all the concepts I've learned are useless. I don't think everything I've gleaned from Ball State has been for nothing."

"Hm." Jo said. "How about this then? 'The wise are not learned; the learned are not wise.'" The smallest hint of a smile played with the corners of her mouth. "Ha." I said. "Ha-ha."

Taoism literally means "the way" and its definition varies depending on who you're asking. Taoist ideas are spread far and wide across a variety of East Asian locations and religions, but some concepts that remain the same are the idea of a connection between nature and humanity (the importance of following natural law instead of instating our own) and the concept of "Pu," the Uncarved Block.

Pooh is the perfect example of the Uncarved Block in Hoff's book. Similar pronunciation between the Chinese "Pu" and Milne's "Pooh" aside, the Uncarved Block is an unadulterated state of being, somewhat akin (through personification) to the lovable stuffed bear. Pu has no prejudices. Pu does not overanalyze the world. Pooh goes along doing what Pooh does, relying on his gut to tell him if it is good or bad. In this way, things generally work out to

his benefit. Pooh knows how to be bored, and is never bored by it. Pooh never worries for very long. Pooh believes that life happens the way it is meant to, and that Everything Will Be Okay.

“I can’t take this anymore, I need a drink,” I exclaimed one night, after we’d had dinner and were attempting to adjust the rabbit ears on my TV to bring in anything other than static. This had become a regular occurrence. “Let’s go somewhere and drink and actually *talk* to each other.” Snow glistened furiously under the gaze of a clear, engorged moon, and we held hands as we walked. I had mittens, so I could not interlace my fingers with hers, which were gloved. Instead I clung to her hand as if I were a worried child, afraid of falling on the ice.

When we got to the bar we shed coats, scarves, hats, melting off outer layers gladly but without celebration. I ordered a pitcher of Killian’s and we sat in cracked leather chairs, facing each other across a small table by the stairwell. “Do you really buy that stuff about higher education being useless?” I asked, pouring our drinks. Jo thought for a moment. “I don’t think it’s useless, I just don’t think it’s necessary.” I nodded, hesitated. “Yeah,” I said, “but what about learning about other people? Knowing about other cultures? Isn’t education uniting us in that sense?” Jo smiled, “You can learn the exact same things just by talking to somebody new. I’m not saying that it’s pointless for you to have been here. Just, maybe what you got from the people you socialized with was more important than anything you got from a book or classroom. Or at least, important in different ways.”

Clouds had overtaken the moon as we walked home, later. We linked arms this time, pushed into one another hoping to find heat that wasn’t there. Three cops streaked past us on icy roads. I made a comment about how cold I was, and Jo said, “I can warm you up.” Smiling devilishly, she reached up under my coat, under layers of clothes to skin, and mock-groped me as



she kissed my cheek. She winked then, laughed, and I could have played along, but I was drunk and I remembered police cars reflected in icy roads. The last thing I needed was to get pulled over for Public Intoxication due to this general tomfoolery. “Don’t.” I said, crossly, and pushed her hands away. Jo looked at me, squared her jaw, and walked on ahead. “It’s not... we could go to jail!” I called after her, but my words elicited no reaction, and they did not slow her departure.

When I arrived home after wandering around the block, attempting to ease frustrations, Jo had already gotten into bed and fallen asleep. I banged around in the kitchen, for a while, trying to wake her up, thinking how unfair it was that she wasn’t stressed over our fight. I read the newspaper on the couch and contemplated sleeping there, then realized that the chances of my sleeping without resolution were slim, and crawled into bed beside Jo. I was furious. I was wounded. I watched her sleep and felt some of that subside. The Uncarved Block knows Everything Will Be Okay. I have lived my life in relationships by the Western cliché “Never go to bed angry.” Jo knows herself well enough to know when she is too tired and cross to talk rationally, and so she just doesn’t do it. Jo went to business school for two years and then left with the fury of a zebra escaping a lioness. She misspells most three syllable words and generally doesn’t use the correct form of “their,” “there,” or “they’re.” I know she knows the difference, I have seen her distinguish when she has to. For the most part, however, she just doesn’t care. She lives a good life, and she tries to view all people equally. She had to ask me what half the words in “The Tao of Pooh” meant, and she still understood the general concept better than I did. If Jo is Pu, if she is the Uncarved Block, then what does that make me?

Under the weight of my furrowed stare, Jo woke up and rolled over. Noticing the way I looked at her in the dark, she reached out for me and yawned. “What’s up?” she asked, voice gravelly from sleep. “I wasn’t trying to hurt your feelings.” I said. “I can’t sleep if we’re mad.” She shrugged. “I’m not mad. I do think you worry about things too much.” She was right, and it stung. “Let’s talk about this tomorrow,” she said. “We don’t have to go to bed angry – we can just put this conversation on hold. I still love you.” Wind moaned through cracks in my windows as we fell asleep, breathing in familiarity, blanketed from the world outside, waiting for the thaw.

## February

Zach and I go driving to smoke cigarettes and pretend we're leaving town for good. In Anderson, we stop at a Big Boy Restaurant because I haven't been inside one since I was twelve years old. I'm used to smoking sections, in general. I spend most of my life drinking coffee in desecrated diners, but there is always an air of mystery at Eva's Pancake House, always a bright-eyed waitress at the far-less bright Sunshine Café. Here the waitress is tired. The patrons are tired. The cartoon Big Boy stopped making them smile years ago. Our server's name is Ashley and every word that echoes from her mouth sounds like her last. She says, "Do you want coffee?" I hear, "I am exhausted from this routine." She says, "Let me find you an ashtray." I hear, "If I died, you would never know." In the next booth a disabled girl keeps saying hello to Zach and me. She says she is turning fourteen next week. We smile weakly, say congratulations. Her mother smiles at us, awkwardly, turns to her daughter, says, "Did you eat your carrots?" I hear, "Would my life be easier without you?"

And it is pessimistic. I am pessimistic, thinking these thoughts, these horrible thoughts that no one in their right mind would verbalize, but I'm not thinking clearly. I am sluggish. Energy doesn't thrive in this airtight environment. Everything is brown, the lights are brown, the carpet is brown, my coffee cup, brown; and energy oozes, earth-toned, from the lights and the carpet and the coffee cup. Energy drips, slowly, and not steadily, sporadically. A light bulb is fading, a car battery is whining. There is energy here, but it is on its last legs.

Maybe it is my energy. I have been so fast for so long. I have a resting heart rate of ninety beats per minute. I am a flash of flesh; every molecule in my body has been sparking and flaring for twenty years, and three days ago, I stopped noticing. I, myself, have not slowed

down. I give off more energy than is necessary, that will never change. I am expending my life's worth of energy in half the time because I feel the need to live up to the me I've created. I have not slowed down. But everything around me has.

Zach has found some crayons. Most of them are brown, all of them are flat, but we draw anyway. Trees. Trees on placemats. We sign our names and lazily reach for the bill – leave trees on placemats next to brown coffee stains and a tidy pile of ashes.

In the kitchen, something shatters. No one seems to notice.

At the counseling center, when you sign yourself up to have your brain picked apart, there are some preliminary questions a computer asks you, just to check your level of mental instability. Do you feel like harming yourself? No. Do you feel like harming others? No. At least I didn't. I'd like to change my answer now that I've met my therapist.

I won't be seeing him again. Everything in his office is an artificial shade of blue, off-blue, non-substance-blue; especially his eyes. He says, "I think you're just stressed out." He says, "Everyone goes through this." I say, "Not me. I've never needed help before. I get through things on my own. It's what I do. What happened? I'm failing my classes. I got caught drinking underage. I need to finish forty hours of community service by the end of the week, or I'll probably go to jail. I'm a disappointment to my parents, to my friends, to anyone who's ever looked up to me before. I cheated on my girlfriend once when I was drunk. I felt guilty for months. When I finally told her about it, when I begged her to give me another chance, she broke up with me. She says we don't fit together." I don't say, "Currently she's fitting pretty well with a sixteen year old girl." He says, "My wife and I are having twins on Wednesday."

He hands me an entire box of tissues and tells me if I keep coming in, I'll feel better in no time. I think it won't change the fact that I missed a midterm. I let him ramble, regardless.

Thirty minutes have passed and I'm bored. I swim around in his eyes for a while, eyes the color of a chlorinated swimming pool, like his blue-glass paperweights and the blue ribbons he's hung up, commemorating all the people who've come into his office feeling blue and left sickly sunshine yellow. His eyes remind me of my first girlfriend's eyes, but hers had depth, and his are nothing more than a cloudless April sky, humming fondly over a green and brown and substance-blue planet.

He says, "If you come back tomorrow, you can start talking to someone else. I'm going on hiatus for a month. My wife and I are having twins on Wednesday." I smile weakly, say congratulations. Maybe when I come back tomorrow, I'll speak with a woman. Maybe her eyes will be brown.

Down the hallway, a door slams. No one seems to notice.

Stephanie is feeling just as lost as I am. Last time I saw her, she was drunk and spitting on the carpets in her dormitory, brown and blue carpets darkened by colorless saliva. She calls me because she needs to pray. We drive to a Catholic church just off campus. I'm Episcopalian, but it makes no difference. Ashes are ashes. Dust is dust. Stephanie and I sit outside on a brown bench with our backs to the road. She pulls out her Bible and begins to read. I feel almost peaceful.

She says, "I'm feeling strong right now. I know God is with me." I hear, "I'll break down again in less than an hour." She starts to read scripture and I try to listen, I really do, but I'm distracted by the noise of my own breath rattling in my lungs. I am battling bronchitis. Secretly, I believe it is lung cancer.

Stephanie has made her peace with God. Maybe God has made God's peace with me. I feel quiet, and tired, the way a person feels after a good cry or a fender-bender. When I climb into the driver's side of my red Volkswagen, I reassure myself by staring down my hazel eyes in the rearview mirror. Stephanie lights a cigarette with a blue lighter. I light a cigarette from my dashboard. Stephanie says, "We are saving each other right now."

Ash from one of our cigarettes gently floats down and lands on my right leg. I pretend not to notice.

At McCullough park, there are two old bridges, dreary and hardly worth mentioning in the daytime, haunting shadows at night. Stephanie and Zach and I have driven here because we're all too restless to stay in one place. We are sitting on a man-made dam at two A.M., our backs to the still water. We pretend that we are interested only in the rapids. Through blackness, we strain our eyes to catch a glimpse of the bridges. They are colorless in the dark. Stephanie is not praying, Zach is not drawing, and I am not thinking for once. Let all who have nothing, let them come to the water. No one says anything. We are saving each other. Right. Now.

My eyes are attempting night vision. I can vaguely make out the bridges, casting dark shadows onto dark waves. These bridges are nothing more than inanimate bystanders to the murder/suicide of this old river. They are apathetic towards the water on both sides of the dam;

the dead half, perfectly still, reflective above the rocky ledge, and the suicidal half which, in realizing its crime, is throwing itself madly, blindly, down over the rocks, down onto the cement dam. The water says, “kish, kish, kish,” effectively saying nothing. I want the bridges to bear witness to the fury of the water, but they see nothing, being simply bridges. They ache and sigh. They never bat an eye at us, or at the river’s great spectacle of life and death that they, in all their mortal permanence, observe (or fail to observe) nightly. “Kish, kish, kish,” says the water, crying out against a pathetic rage. “Kish, kish, kish,” and I try to listen, I really do, but I am distracted by the sound of my own breath rattling in my lungs.

Deeply I inhale with eyes closed, wanting to know this place for its presence, rather than its sights. I am caught by the tip of my nose. I can smell brown picnics here, and the cold, damp earth of early spring, when brown still outweighs green. I inhale to catch the pervasive scent of car exhaust which combines with cigarette smoke and cheeseburgers. Then my nostrils sting of frozen blades of grass, sharp and olive under an early March frost. I can smell distant pine needles, green spray-paint and cheap perfume. I smell substance blue water particles, icosahedrons, twenty sided solids of raging, wet matter that barely touch my senses for an instant before I’m distracted and disconnected again. Here. Tonight. I can even smell the rocks; like smelling metal, they are frigid and sharp, and blue-grey, and leave liquid iron behind, pooled behind the back corners of my tongue. Saltwater meets freshwater as I become part of the dam I’m resting on, and tears bounce from my eyes to my knees and into the rapids below, flashing gills and waving fins goodbye. I kick my feet and open my eyes. A light bulb is glowing. A car battery is turning over. “Kish, kish, kish,” says the water. I hear my breath, surviving in my lungs.

In the dark it is hard to see any colors at all. I am waiting for the bridges to mobilize, to say goodbye. Zach is motioning Stephanie and me back to his truck. We three have passed the point of leaving without wanting to stay here forever, caught up in this ionized air, but we drive away anyway. We drive away. We say nothing. I hear, "You will return to the ground, since from it you were taken. Ashes are ashes. Dust is dust." We wind down brown gravel, once again heading home.

Behind us, a stoplight changes, red to green. No one seems to notice.



## March

This is the second time I've tried to attend Sunday morning devotions at the Baha'i Center in Muncie, and the second time that no one else has showed up. Like most other characteristics of the members of this faith community – their focus on unity and gender equality, their willingness to accept change and growth within the faith through time – I find their tardiness and weekend absenteeism to be endearing. I have been doing a broad study of the faith and its adherents here for about three weeks. I wish I had years over which to intrude.

But for now I will sit in the empty parking lot for another couple of minutes, watching as the early spring rain on my windshield turns to snow, then back to rain. I will flick through radio stations until I find "The Thistle and Shamrock," Fiona Ritchie's Celtic music hour on National Public Radio. Although I have only done this twice, the sitting, radio flicking, I have begun to refer to these times mentally as my Sunday traditions. My "Celtic Music Sunday mornings." When I have completed my ethnographic study of Muncie's Baha'i, I will keep the people close to my heart not through memories of my time at the center alone, but also through all future Sunday morning activities (cleaning, writing, exercising) that rejoice in the quiet constant background of Fiona Ritchie's latest selections.

Nick went with me to the Baha'i Center for the Feast of Jalal (Glory) last Wednesday, because his dinner date got cancelled and I did not want to go to the celebration alone. Jo left for New Zealand a couple weeks ago, because her visa waiver expired. I miss her, but it is probably best that she no longer accompanies me to the center. Rachel gets a funny, closed off look in her

eyes every time I say too much about Jo. Every time conversation gets too close to revealing the depth of our relationship.

There were fewer people at the Center than I'd seen at the last feast, which was nice, for me. I had fewer names to remember, fewer people to smile awkwardly at. When we arrived, Nick became engaged in a conversation with Bahruz, almost immediately, about having a useless degree in Latin and a desire to walk amongst the world's blue-collar heroes and heroines. "I've got this friend, who's a professor," I heard Nick say. "After work, he says he has to find a bar, or an auto mechanic's garage... somewhere he can talk with people who have their feet on the ground." Bahruz laughed appreciatively, and I wrote this down in my notebook, because even after three visits I am still viewing everything around me as data.

Earlier, Nick had accompanied me to the mall to buy shoes. I had donated my old white tennis shoes to Goodwill, before realizing that a good pair of white tennis shoes might be something I need – despite how weathered they are, or how much they look like orthotics. So we wasted time combing the wasteland for a way to waste money on footwear, Nick being jovial with the salespeople while I did my best to avoid them. I am one of those people who can find what I need in a store on my own, thank you very much, and it's always only irritated me when sales associates attempt to get in the way of that. Even after working as a sales associate for two years in high school, I could never bring myself to ask that dread question, "Can I help you with something?"

"Can I help you with something?" the Journey's employee asked, kindly.

"No thanks I'm –"

“Yes!” Nick called, bounding towards us from across the room, a pair of hot pink Pumas in hand. He looked at me. “I don’t suppose you’d want these?” After I shook my head, he turned to the salesman. “Sir, this is of the utmost importance. Tennis shoes, under fifty bucks, can have accents but she wants them to be *mostly* white. Size nine and a half. Can’t look like orthotics.” At this last comment, the young man assisting us looked quizzically in my direction, but I simply shook my head. “I’ll see what I can do,” he remarked, and disappeared into the back room.

“Can I have a cigarette?” I asked Nick when we’d left, half an hour later, new, white, nine and a half tennis shoes (that didn’t resemble orthotics) bought and paid for. “Sure,” he said, and we parked ourselves on a spot of grass surrounded by pavement to recreate. He paused, took a half breath, like he always does when he’s about to pontificate, and began to speak. “I’ve been thinking about detachment. I’m personally connecting all these ideas about detachment to De Mello’s writings on awareness.” I shook my head. “I can’t get too close with the Eastern concepts, not once any sort of middle way starts to include emotions. I understand not being driven by material possessions. I understand not letting... traffic or spilled coffee get to you. I’m no good at it, but I understand it. Still, somehow I take *comfort* in the highs and lows of my own emotions. I get that it’s still ‘joyous’ to be perfectly content all the time, to accept life for what it is... but I *don’t* get it, at the same time. What is joy if not that spike of adrenaline? Isn’t there beauty in that?” Nick hesitated for more than thirty seconds, then said, “Recently I had an experience that I felt was very powerfully detached. I want to make a distinction. This is where I learned that distinction, this event. I want to make a distinction between detachment and numbness. Being detached is not refusing to experience the feelings, it is understanding them *while* experiencing them. Being aware of where they’re coming from. That’s always within.

My feelings are mine. They are not caused by anyone else's behavior. I can allow other people's behavior to influence my feelings, but ultimately they're my responsibility. Everyone's responsible for their own feelings. Being numb is ignoring and not experiencing the feelings. Detachment is taking a step back and saying 'This is what I'm feeling right now. Why am I feeling it? Where is it coming from? What have I allowed to turn into anger within me? What have I allowed to turn into joy? Why is this important to me? What do I want?' Invariably we get upset because we're not getting what we want." I thought of Jo, who reminds me in tense situations to respond, instead of reacting. To survey the situation and choose the best way forward, instead of lashing out with the first cruel retort my emotions can muster.

At the Feast of Jalal, Rachel's husband Homand asked me if I would read aloud, as he passed around leaflets with prayers printed on them. "Sure." I said. "I'd love to." I was instructed to read the second prayer, from "The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah," one of the prophet's texts of revelations and teachings. But first Rachel led us in singing "Blessed Is The Spot," from the Baha'i Songbook, a bright and upbeat tune that reminded me of the vaguely religious, mostly union born campfire songs we used to sing at Circle Pines Center, a Co-operative Camp (read: child hippy commune) where I worked a couple of summers ago. I became so involved in the Baha'i songs, rejoicing inwardly due to the gender and cultural inclusiveness of "Father Abraham Had Many Children" and "Navajo Lullaby," that I nearly missed my turn to speak. I heard the silence once another member, Mark, finished his reading, and realized it was my turn to share. I wanted my reading to be a prayer, I wanted it to not become some bland part of my research, but rather part of my spiritual journey, so I tried in

earnest to ponder the words as I read, “O Children of Men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous Glory.”

After prayers, Nick and I left the room momentarily so that the Baha’i members could have consultation with one another regarding the budget, upcoming election, and other parts of the faith that outsiders and guests are not supposed to be present during. Gwen, Rachel, and Mark came with us to keep us company. Mark explained to us that he came to the faith in the 1970s, from a distinctly Christian upbringing. He said that he never had a quarrel with the teachings of Jesus, but found a much greater unity and spiritual understanding through the writings of Baha’u’llah. “Just as peoples’ faith was confirmed by reading the Gospels and Acts and the Epistles of Paul,” Mark stated, “[my] faith was aroused and confirmed by the historical accounts of spontaneous revelation of beautiful and relevant Verses. I thought; this is how Jesus would have written, if He had left Books in His own hand!” As we all returned to the main room for food and tea, Mark excitedly told me about Tahirih (born: Fatimih Bigum Baraghani), an early Baha’i woman who would often appear in front of others without her traditional veil. The Baha’i tradition grew from an Islamic background, and Tahirih held fast to her belief that this new faith was exempt from the ways of its Islamic past. This was met with indignation until Baha’u’llah told those present that this woman was well within her rights, and that from now on,

equality between women and men would be valued and protected by Baha'is. I was scribbling furiously, trying to hang onto every word. I liked Mark's enthusiasm, he was excited and young, probably mid-thirties. I made up a life for him in my head, decided that he works on campus as a professor of English, his primary interests being poetry and feminism. I didn't bother to ask him if my assumptions are true – even if they weren't spot on, I figured I had to be pretty close. “Mark, I'd like to ask you some more questions,” I said after a few more tales, “but I've got to leave for tonight. Is there any way I could get your email address?” Mark was thrilled and after a brief exchange, I left, feeling like my worries about lack of information for the ethnography were over.

I've become very interested in the gap present in the Baha'i faith between personal truth and necessity to stick to the tenets. I've spoken with younger people who go to the Center or are members, specifically on the issue of homosexuality. Besides being a personal issue for me, I just don't understand how the faith can claim to unify and have the same divisions that nearly all other religions have. How they can embrace scientific advancement, yet ignore it in the face of genetic research done on the subject of homosexuality. To walk through the world, attempting to be a spiritual individual, and find no community that welcomes you is like having doors slammed in your face, every hour of every day. It is like hearing sweet music of family and freedom and running towards that tune, only to find an impassable brick wall between yourself and what you seek. It takes the wind out of you daily. But you become used to it. So I shouldn't have been surprised when Mark knocked the wind out of me.

The day after The Feast of Jalal I emailed him, asking him if he could send some general information, and also if he could explain to me why, in such a faith, homosexuality was still a

big deal. The younger people that I spoke to within Muncie's Baha'i community weren't concerned on the subject, assuming that it, like other things, would change as the faith did.

"They developing history of Baha'i is fluid," one insisted. "This, like so many other things, will change." Mark did not agree. I received a reply from him later that afternoon:

Re: Baha'i Center

About homosexuality, I perceived that you may have trans-gender issues, but it should not prevent you from devoting yourself to the latest Revelation from God, if that is what you come to believe about Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh is the divine Physician, and He knows what is best for the planet, and for the individual souls. Nearly everyone is functionally something, male or female --although hormone may give some boys female characteristics, and some may give girls boy characteristics, and this inclines them to the social behaviors of one over the other. All are created by God, and since He loved them enough to create them, we should all love each other too.

But sex is for reproduction primarily, and that between one husband and one wife, at a time. It is a hard issue for some, in this tumultuous age, and at their points of development, but maturity and counsel help, over time.

Of course the Godhead is Spirit, and not female or male, attributes of the creation. May your spiritual quest draw you ever closer to that mystic realm of the all-glorious Beloved.

Sincerely,  
Your friend, Marko

Initially I found the email humorous. This was the first time anyone had assumed I was transgendered, and my brain clung to that. I began to wonder if other people perceived me as such, and why. I came to the conclusion that my hairy legs and lack of breasts must have been confusing, and that perhaps from now on I should wear a sandwich board reading "nope: just a lesbian" to avoid any future misunderstandings.

Despite having a laugh, over the next couple of days I became more and more agitated by Mark's email, specifically the part about maturity and counsel helping me to "deal with" my "wrong" assumption that sex could be for fun, not just for procreation. "What about heterosexual couples that can't have children, or don't want to?" I thought bitterly, before reminding myself that Mark was a nice guy, trying to be a friend, and not some anonymous gay-basher I was up against in a Letter-to-the-Editor Battle Royale. However, when I received a second email from Mark, this time about Baha'u'llah's writings on pederasty, my rage instantly spiked from dormant to "let's hurt somebody." I had opened my inbox, prepared to craft a cutting reply about the stark difference between loving, adult relationships, and the abuse of minors, when in the back of my head I heard Nick pause between a hit on a cigarette. I knew what he was going to say. He always pauses before he pontificates.

I glance at the clock. 11:20. No one is coming for Sunday devotions, it is time for me to accept this and head back to my apartment. I will turn on Fiona Ritchie and open the blinds because today is a beautiful day. I will do some Spring Cleaning and then take a bike ride. I will leave my ethnography hopelessly unfinished and wait, and hope, for another chance. To attend Baha'i worship, or to just bask in the pleasure of another Celtic Music Sunday Morning. Yesterday I wrote Mark back thanking him for his information, letting him know that I'm very much engaged to a woman, but that I hope we can continue to discuss the faith, and that we can continue to develop a friendship. He responded promptly, saying that would be fine and he looked forward to seeing me again. "Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul... by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness



and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light!”

## April

*"I want to know why Jesus isn't a flame."*

*-Sherman Alexie*

It was supposed to rain today but it didn't. The sun stayed out, and it even warmed up enough to validate the shorts I've been wearing since March (in defiance of cold weather). I'm at Manchester College playing on the lawn in front of the library for their Peace Week capstone. I've got my guitar and my music and I'm talking about change. Change. Revolution? I'm talking about being engaged to a woman, talking about this at a Brethren College, and people are cheering for me.

Years ago, when I was in high school, I didn't even have the guts to join the GSA. Look how far I've come.

Two weeks ago, I played for a Day of Silence Open Mic in Michigan. I was surrounded by high school kids that started their own damn GSAs and didn't care what anybody thought. Look how far they've come.

This is my second year performing at Manchester's Peace Week and I tend to think about religion when I'm here. It's almost unavoidable. This is a Christian university, the closest available bathroom is in the chapel, and the new student pastor was rector at my home parish some years back. It's strange to see him again, and comforting, because I somehow don't have

to be the good Christian girl anymore. Fluidity is allowed here. Questioning. Multiplicity of beliefs.

My Dad showed up earlier carrying someone else's borrowed video camera. He set it up and we sat together on the lawn to watch the first act – a booming gospel choir. I tried not to notice when we leaned back at the same time and reclined on our elbows. I tried not to notice how even our feet, resting naturally, pointed lazily in the same direction.

“It's hard for us as young people to incite change, because we aren't respected,” I say into the microphone, and there is a murmur of appreciation and agreement from the crowd. “We want peace. We want unification. We want diversity, we want freedom and friendship.”

Diversity. Diversity of what? Everything. Religion. Ethnicity. Sexual Orientation. Ideas. Philosophies. And so on. My myths professor says that a synthesis of religious beliefs is dangerous because it causes identity crises, that without enough individual cultural distinction or religious history, we are led to savagery and warfare. A week ago, I lay awake after reading Sherman Alexie's “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight In Heaven.” I thought maybe my myths professor was right. When I was the child of a long line of missionaries, I knew my future would be the same. When I set aside those things, some part of me unwittingly stayed with them. The Native American has anger, stories. Ancestry. The African American has the songs as well, not literal songs, maybe, but ghosts of songs that stir the blood, pound the heart. Memories from another mind. The Mexican immigrant brings over more and more family members until the house is packed and lively, the songs, the stories are passed down to children,

to children's children. When I look at my own past, I see nothing but bloodlust and persecution. I see nothing that I want to embrace.

And so I search, diligently, for unity amidst diversity. For a way to bring people together. For a way to take responsibility for my ancestor's mistakes, as well as my own. For a way to set fire to the future.

There is a "game" we played when I was a child at camp. Only halfway through did we realize it was not a game at all. "Line up," they told us. "Shoulder to shoulder. Walk across the yard, and when you come to a piece of trash, any piece of trash in front of you, pick it up." In this way the responsibility was shared.

Someday a great number of us will march, shoulder to shoulder. We will pick up trash. We will rebuild houses, we will plant trees. We will sing our songs and learn the songs of others. Starting on the West Coast, beginning in San Diego and stretching north past Mount Vernon. Eastward we will march. Only when we reach Atlantic shores will we sleep, heavily and soundlessly, resting our heads on each other's chests. And even then our dreams will be of marching, always marching.

Onstage at Manchester College, I sing a song about revolution, and notice that my father taps his foot in the same hesitant rhythm as my own.

## May

The walk from the village at Havasupai to the sweat lodge is barely a mile on your way to the campground. Only a weathered rock designates which path takes you stumbling down a few feet and into a humble clearing near the edge of a lime-enriched creek. If you didn't know the rock, you'd miss it entirely. The lodge itself is larger than ancestral lodges – an impressive mud dome meant to seat about ten people at once. We arrived at the creek drenched with sweat from the short hike. Spirits were high and we swam, unabashed, in water as clear and blue as the southwestern sky. I had been nervous, earlier, in anticipation of the ceremony, but my fears lessened as I let the current catch me and sweep me under a fallen tree that rested just above the river.

Two members of our group had rented horses and they arrived a moment later, breathless and wild-eyed with stories. The rest of us listened eagerly and our hurried chit-chat in the water was a welcome respite from earlier, petty grudges and disputes. We had been with each other every moment for more than a week, and tempers had worn thin. But the water was healing, as was the sky, and thankfully, gratefully, we forgave one another. A dog had followed us from the village and he yawned and plopped himself down on a wayward pile of clothes, sending up a cloud of sand and dust.

We waited for the first round to begin and as we did so, our chatter lessened. I found a secluded spot in shallow water and repeated the words of the angels (who must have been so terrifying), “Be Not Afraid,” until I heard a long, low whistle from the lodge. It was time to begin.

The previous summer I had been involved in a sweat lodge while staying as a volunteer in Louisiana for a month. The structure of that ceremony had been based off of Lakota tradition.

The Plains People say “O Mitakuye Oyasin!” which means “All Our Relations.” The Supai say this as well, and I was comforted by this small similarity to something that I’d done once, now so long ago.

This day at the lodge at Havasupai, the atmosphere felt much more solemn than my experiences in the bayou. I was prepared, this time, not for an experiment, but for a spiritual experience. I hoped I had made my peace with the spirits, and I calmed myself by mouthing “O Mitakuye Oyasin” on my walk to the lodge. Apart from chanting this, the Supai also encourage uttering “Ufma” to let out the bad or sick parts of oneself, while blowing on the infected part. I entered the lodge, sat down, and blew on my lungs and on my heart.

Hot rocks, fresh from fire, line the West side of the Sweat Lodge at Havasupai. This is to signify the direction our spirits wander after death. Water is poured on the rocks to create the healing steam, and consequently, the hissing noise of water evaporating that signifies the breath of the ancestors (O Mitakuye Oyasin). When one enters the lodge, they should be backwards, on hands and knees, so that crawling out after each round parallels birth and rebirth.

And so, after the first round, we stumbled out, breathless, covered with sweat and mud from the lodge, and flung ourselves into the welcoming river. Arizona sun dried us almost instantly upon emerging, and we grinned at one another. Proud. Vibrant.

The first three rounds were nearly identical in format. The sacred songs that are nearly never sung outside of ceremonial gatherings were shared with us. I trembled in the dark. Three times I pressed my face to the ground to escape the rising steam. I breathed deeply and kissed the dirt, paying homage to my earth mother.

The second and third rounds were shorter but successively hotter than the first. Our prayers became ragged coughs and desperate ufnas. I blew on my lungs, and on my heart.

During the fourth round, we were asked to introduce ourselves. People began sharing blessed information about who they were and why they were at the ceremony. They gave thanks. Humble thanks. Short thanks.

It was Mana who broke this trend. Mana, which means “fallen one.” And “falling one.” And “one who will fall.” He is indignant towards the life he has been given. He is an alcoholic. He is unemployed.

But he is the village fire keeper, and during his introduction he explained in great detail and at great length how this job is the most important position to hold during the sweat ceremony. The fire keeper makes sure the stones remain hot and helps to place them in the lodge before each round. “No one has mentioned my importance,” Mana said, “but I am the most significant person here.” There was anger in his voice, and disappointment. I felt a twinge of irritation as his speech dragged on, but I tried to repress it. I decided to say something succinct when my turn came.

“Rumi said there are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground,” was what I offered, hesitantly, as people shuffled and coughed around me. “I am so grateful to be a part of this one,” I finished, and bowed my head. When all had finished introducing themselves, the rite leader poured water on the ceremonial stones. But nothing happened. We shifted nervously in the dark, waiting and praying for steam. Mana coughed in front of me, and spat. He leaned backwards to avoid the heat and flipped his head to spit again. The spitting itself did not disgust me; it was an act of cleansing. Of purification. But as his head came back, his knotty ponytail

caught the side of my face, startling me and knocking sweat into my eyes. Whose sweat, I did not know. I sputtered.

Mana oozed further back, pushing me to the very wall, a mass of mud and sticks. Branches caught in my hair and poked at my ribcage. Mana coughed, and spat again. I tried to remember, “He is my brother.” I tried to remember, “We are one.”

We prayed and waited, but the rocks continued to cool, and the fire keeper offered no explanation. When we gave up and returned to the outside world, to the river, the sun was gone, lost to a harboring but formidable canyon. Rain clouds appeared to the west. We shivered in the water. We shivered on land. We turned our feet and headed back to our campsite. Others around me chattered excitedly about our experience, but I could not shake my anger with Mana. I believe in unconditional forgiveness, but such ideals are harder to practice than preach. “He is *not* my brother.” I thought angrily, as the sky grew darker. “We are not one.”

Suddenly I tripped and stumbled forward, catching myself with my hands but still managing to crack my forehead on a tree root that lazily stretched across my path. I paused to breathe, and rested my head there, ashamed. Rumi said there are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

The next day we left the village. Packing our gear and hiking away from paradise was unnerving, disappointing. Mana walked with some of us, generously pointing out landmarks along the way that we wouldn’t have otherwise noticed. “Look.” He said. “That marks the gravesite of my father’s bloodline. Someday I will be buried there as well.” He pointed up, and our eyes followed. There on the side of an unimaginably steep hill was a nearly invisible white cross. Rocks lay at the bottom, seeming scattered, but I had the distinct feeling they were



purposely placed. Small purple flowers grew wild from the earth just around the grave, a bold cry of color and defiance, marking the place of Mana's ancestors. Marking the place of my brother's family.

## June

### ***Luke 4:38-39***

*“He rose up from the synagogue, and entered into Simon’s house.  
Simon’s mother-in-law was afflicted with a great fever,  
and they begged him for her.”*

“SHABAM!” spake Jesus, and thusly Simon’s mother-in-law was healed. There came a great noise from the campers and staff who bore witness to all these things, and my sister shrugged slightly at Father Charlie (who gave her two thumbs up) before she slunk offstage to remove her beard and sandals.

Hers was perhaps the greatest rendition of Jesus Christ that Episcopal Summer Camp in Northern Indiana had ever seen. Each June, for a week, volunteer staff members from around the Diocese convened on the properties of Camp Alexander Mack to chaperone a couple hundred kids as they kayaked, played ultimate Frisbee, and celebrated biblical messages (some slightly modified). In this case my sister, being a Counselor In Training, had been grouped with other teens and given the responsibility of writing, directing, and performing in skits intended to introduce the day’s theme. What this day’s theme was, I couldn’t tell you. But she was cast as Jesus, and for the rest of the week, all the campers looked at her as if she actually was.

That summer was my first year as an actual counselor, although I had been attending camp since the ripe age of nine. Father Charlie was a friend of Father Brian, who was my priest at home, and the two of them together were the “God Squad” camp had been yearning for. They came, they rocked, they conquered. And when I was eighteen, I eagerly accepted any chance to join them. Their banter doubled us over in laughter. They shared custody of a posable Jesus action figure (similar to Kevin Smith’s “Buddy Christ”), which they furtively played with while

the bishop led worship. Jesus cartwheeled in ecstasy during especially powerful gospel readings. Brian and Charlie were also the headliners for the “music team” constructed last-minute for camp each year. I played guitar and sang with them every chance I got. Somehow, praise and worship songs as old as camp itself sounded new and powerful coming from these guys. If I had been old enough to appreciate Vertical Horizon’s acoustic phase while it was in full swing, I would have easily compared their emotional and spiritual appeal to Brian and Charlie’s pure talent and style without blinking an eye.

So it’s safe to say that I had a bit of a crush.

But let’s back-up and explain that this “crush” I speak of was one that presented itself in a purely platonic sense. I wanted to be older so that I could really pal around with these guys. I wished that I had gone to seminary in Sewanee, Tennessee with them when they were the rebels, best friends, top of the class. Father Brian had known me since I was eleven, when he had been installed as the new priest at Saint Annes’ Episcopal church, where I grew up. I once helped the rest of the youth group toss him in a river during a church picnic to celebrate his new place in our hearts. I don’t think he took it as well as we had hoped. He wore a thin, painful smile when he sloshed back to the shore, but come on. It was tradition. I once tried to write sermons after hearing him preach on Paul Simon’s “The Bodyguard.” I once sat down for coffee with him to discuss my youthful, burgeoning homosexuality.

In explanation: some weeks before our coffee meeting, Brian had asked the congregation of Saint Anne’s to email him stories of how God had personally touched individual lives. At the end of the week he would read our stories in place of his usual sermon. I had been wondering

about my sexuality long enough to have created a secret world online where everything about me except my identity was presented through a journal. It was comforting to have this outlet, especially in the midst of religious persecution, and I wrote about everything from who I liked to what I thought about Christian condemnation of me. This particular online journal site had a “random” button that members could click to be taken to one of forty thousand online diaries. The lottery was often boring, there are a surprising amount of people who write online summaries of their lives such as “today I did laundry for four hours and then made tacos.” Occasionally, however, the link paid off. One night a girl hundreds of miles away who had also been struggling with sexuality and the church hit “random” and wound up at my journal, on the very page in which I discussed particular biblical passages which have been taken to ostracize homosexuals. I wrote about alternative interpretations of these passages, mentioning specifically the story of Sodom and Gomorra and the fact that many believe it condemns rape, violence, and inhospitality. Not homosexuality. Finding my writings proved a Godsend for the reader – she thanked me for being willing to talk about what I had, and said that she had needed the comfort but couldn’t find it elsewhere.

Out of forty thousand diaries, she ended up at mine. I gathered courage, and then wrote an email to Father Brian telling him my story, explaining how I thought in this case God worked in my life by helping me to help someone else. I said that was the surest sign of God in anyone’s life – the ability to be good to each other, and to rejoice when we take a one in forty thousand chance and come out better for it. This reader had been comforted by my words, and I had been comforted by her existence, which validated my own. Father Brian wrote me back the next day, saying he couldn’t share my story in church as it was “too personal.” But, he went on, he’d love to have coffee sometime to discuss what I had written.

So we faced each other at the busiest coffeehouse in town, avoiding eye contact. “How are your parents?” he asked, nervously, glancing back from me, to the window, to his coffee. “They’re fine.” He nodded. “And how is your sister?” I shrugged. “As far as I know, she’s fine, too.” Father Brian nodded again. There was an uncomfortable silence (one of many) until he finally worked up the courage to say, “So. About your email... um... has this, have your feelings manifested themselves in your life, in any way?” I tried not to laugh at the fact that this man had just said ‘manifested’ in regard to my sexuality, and replied, “No, not really, I mean, hi, we live in rural Indiana.” He laughed appreciatively, a nice break from the awkwardness, and our conversation went on. I don’t remember anything else he said, just that the words left me feeling discouraged. He seemed to be avoiding the subject, rather than taking a stance on it. He didn’t tell me that my homosexuality was wrong. He didn’t tell me it was permissible. He didn’t say anything. I had no answers for the questions I had wanted to ask, I had not felt comfortable asking them. Does God hate me? Why would I be feeling these things if they were wrong? I’ve never done anything hugely wrong before. Why this? Is it my fault? What do I do?

I left. It was May. I walked to my car, I drove home. I got up diligently every morning for the next two weeks, and then I graduated from high school. No rebel, not top of my class, but I’d done well enough to obtain a scholarship and admittance into the Honors program at Ball State University, and I was looking forward to making a fresh start there in the fall.

I worked at Goodwill for most of the summer, taking a week off in June to be a general counselor and part-time musician at Camp Mack. Father Brian had said nothing about our uncomfortable conversation in the previous weeks, and I saw him standing next to Charlie

outside Becker Lodge when I pulled up in my white, 1990 Volkswagen Cabriolet, top down, blasting The Cranberries. I cut the engine and jumped out, sporting hideous aviator shades. “Hey!” I called to them. “Ready for another one?” Charlie laughed and I ran to hug him. The previous year we had bonded exponentially playing Indigo Girls covers on our breaks. I was looking forward to this week, to more of the same.

Camp, for me, has always had an escapist effect. It is a chance to forget about the problems that plague my daily life, my little struggles and worries, and escape into the woods (or something like them) for days at a time. Later I would take this history and transfer it to spending whole summers in Michigan, Minnesota, wherever I could find work as a counselor. But at this point in my life, all I had was Mack. All I had was one week. And with the enormity of my current struggles, blissful ignorance was not an option.

Nicole was the first one there to find out about me. Nicole had been one of the rebel leaders when we were campers together. She was a year younger than me and ultimately cooler. We shared a cabin together my last summer before staff apprenticeship. We didn’t really hang out, but we didn’t hate each other. When we were thrown together as Counselors in Training the next year, we formed the unlikely friendship of cool-kid and unattractive-funny-girl. A lot of it had to do with our mutual adoration of Charlie. We followed him like lovesick puppies.

Nicole and I took afternoon breaks with Shawn, the third member of our triune. We lingered amongst sparse patches of trees, hiding from the campers who otherwise dictated our lives. Nicole talked about the boyfriends she’d had in the year since we’d seen each other. She rolled her eyes through her narrative, disgusted with most of them, perhaps disgusted with the male population in general, then turned to me and asked, “What about you? Boy troubles?” I

coughed and smiled, to myself mostly, before replying, “Nope, not really.” Nicole’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, so you’ve got a boyfriend?” I laughed audibly this time. “Nope.” Nicole looked puzzled. “So what?” she asked. “Girl troubles then?” I looked directly at her. “You could say that.” The silence following this statement would have impressed mimes. I’m pretty sure that even the birds stopped singing. Then Nicole lost it. “What? I was just kidding! You’re a lesbian? I mean, I don’t care, I just... *wow*. Really?” I nodded. Shawn attempted to cover laughter by clearing his throat. Nicole asked further questions, I answered them, and the three of us returned to our jobs, unchanged. Nicole would joke for years about the awkwardness of my revelation. That afternoon she suggested talking to Charlie to get a more liberal view from the one the church had given me for years, and to this I agreed.

So it came down to the third night of camp. Campfire songs still echoed through the trees as counselors shuttled campers back to their units. Their cries could also be heard through the growing darkness, and it was nice to listen to their voices blending with those of the night itself. Sprawled on the stone steps of Becker Lodge, I strummed random chords on my guitar and waited for Charlie to meet me after an executive-type staff meeting, which probably consisted of more fart jokes than formalities. When he finally arrived and asked me what I had wanted to talk to him about, I rambled for ages about not feeling accepted and worrying about judgment from others before finally managing to say (after quickly glancing around us to make sure we were well away from prying eyes) “I think I’m, well, I like girls.” Charlie nodded. “Yeah, I had guessed that.” I grinned. “Because I play Indigo Girls and wear boy shorts and don’t shave my legs?” Charlie shook his head. “Mostly because of what you’ve told me about not being that into the guys you’ve dated. So.” He paused. I waited for him to say “Has this manifested itself in your life in any way.” He didn’t. Instead, he asked, “Have you ever felt that this part of you

was wrong? Do you have guilt over it?” I opened my mouth to reply, “Well, yes, obviously, it’s against God’s plan.” I opened my mouth to say, “Everyone I’ve ever spoken to about this has told me I am sinning.” What came out instead was, “Well... not exactly. I mean, I went through a time of feeling guilty, but I don’t think it was really me feeling guilty so much as... thinking that I should feel guilty because everyone around me talked so badly about homosexuals. And then I talked to Father Brian about it, but he just seemed really uncomfortable the whole time, like he definitely wasn’t okay with it. But honestly, whenever I’ve seriously thought about it, about myself, I’ve had this quiet spot in the pit of my stomach telling me that Everything Will Be Okay.” Charlie nodded and smiled. “Yep,” he said, “That would be God. You should listen to that. By the way, Brian might have already mentioned some of this to me...”

I groaned. “So you heard about the coffee fiasco?”

“Ha ha.”

“I can’t believe he asked if this had ‘manifested’ itself in my life.”

“How could it have? You live in Indiana.”

“Dude, that’s totally what I said.”

Charlie put a hand on my shoulder and I looked up at him. “Brian is a good man,” he said gently, “he just has a few old ideas, and a lot of people to please and appease. If he’s unwilling to take a stand, it’s because of those pressures. Maybe he doesn’t know what he thinks about homosexuality. Maybe he knows exactly what he thinks, and he’s afraid to say it to the rest of them. Maybe, in that sense, you need to be a part of *his* coming out process.” Just then, I heard a noise from the bushes a few feet away at the edge of the parking lot. Nicole emerged,



acting pissed. “Jesus! Are you two done yet? I know you’re a queer and everything, but is this going to take all night?” Charlie looked at me. “I believe we’re done here,” he said, “unless there was anything else you wanted to talk about?” I stood up and shook my head. “Not at the moment. But believe me, I’ll let you know.”

The rest of the week went as smoothly as can be expected, excepting for the night that Marcus caught me swearing at the younger, hipper staff campfire and asked me if I kissed my mother “with those lips.” And for the mass lice outbreak that came to our attention on the day before all the campers were to go home. But that in and of itself fit perfectly into the theme of the week, a take-off on Lemony Snickett. We called this session “A Series of Fortunate Events” or “How God Shows Us the Silver Lining.” You may think there’s no silver lining to a lice epidemic (and the camp directors would agree with you), but nothing brings a faith community closer together than shampooing nine-hundred heads (or being shampooed) while singing praise songs a capella in the staff bathroom. Most of the kids that were affected reported this single act as being the highlight of their week, to the chagrin of the program staff who had spent months planning everything else.

Saturday, the campers left before noon. We had a final staff meeting, and dispersed to say our goodbyes to each other, and to camp itself. I piled dirty clothes and guitars into my car for the drive home. Nicole and Shawn would be coming with me for a couple of days to unwind at my parents’ lake cottage, now I just needed to see if there was anyone left that I hadn’t already hugged three times. As I glanced around the gravel parking lot, Father Brian caught my eye. He cocked his head and motioned me over, holding what looked like a Buddy Christ with posable

arms. When I reached him he smiled, and extended the action figure. “I think you should have this.”

“No shit.” Nicole gasped as we drove across rural roads back to the highway. “He *gave* you that?” Shawn also stared at the plastic Jesus, agape, and commented, “I think we should take him to restaurants and put french fries in his outstretched arms.” I considered this. “That’s not a bad idea,” I said, “This is my body, which is given for you, it might need salt.” Nicole laughed and placed the action figure on my dashboard next to a Jade Buddha and an Ani Difranco sticker. “What a week,” she said. I sighed, nodded, and replied in fashion, “Shabam.” Nicole slapped my arm and shook her head, laughing as she tried to frown, “Brittany!” she yelled. “I’m appalled. You kiss your mother with those lips?”

## July

*“Generally there are stable relations between the various religious communities [of Tanzania]; however, some urban Muslim groups are sensitive to perceived discrimination in government hiring and law-enforcement practices. In addition, there is some tension between secular and fundamentalist Muslims.*

*-International Religious Freedom Report 2000*

“What have they got?” I asked my sister, nervously, as we crouched behind the cement wall surrounding the roof of our grandparent’s home in Dar Es Salaam. “Let me get a look.” She bravely turned, pressing dirty knees against the cool concrete of the roof, and lifted herself until her eyes passed the edge of the wall, gazing brightly towards the next rooftop over. After half a second, she crouched back down and looked at me, shaking her head, eyes wide as dinner-plates. “They’ve got,” she said incredulously, “naked Barbie dolls.” I threw myself up and leaned out over the rail, throwing my head back in delight. “We know you’re there!” I shouted, and youthful brown arms yanked naked Barbie dolls down until we could see nothing, only hear the giggling of Rosie’s brothers, pleased for having riled us on yet another humid morning in Tanzania.

Who knows what time it was, it could have been ten AM or six AM or eight... during the two weeks that my family stayed in Tanzania, I never slept past dawn. I would wake from sweat-soaked dreams to blink blearily through mosquito netting out to the gray, misted garden, as light gently swept away the remaining fog of the night before. My journey from sleep to wake was always an easy one, I was rocked gently towards consciousness each new day by the first haunting Muslim call to prayer, resonant Arabic words echoing through the city from the mosque connected with Muhimbili Hospital across the road.

*Christians, including Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Protestants, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, constitute approximately 45 percent of a population of about 30 million. Approximately 40 percent of the population are Muslim. Adherents of traditional indigenous religions and atheists account for approximately 10 percent of the population. Approximately 5 percent of the population practice other faiths, including Hinduism and Buddhism.*  
*-International Religious Freedom Report 2000*

### *An Understanding*

My grandfather has said that the relationships between Christians and Muslims in Tanzania are generally good. When I questioned him on the subject in regard to his time as a missionary, his reply was that multiple families had members of both of the Abrahamic faiths, and that conversions were fluent between the two. Furthermore, he went on to volunteer that, at least during his time in Dar Es Salaam, there was an “understanding” in the government that the presidents would alternately be either Christian or Muslim. The first president was a Christian, the second was Muslim... and so on. This worked primarily because of single-party dominance since the country’s independence in 1963. Whether a Christian or a Muslim takes the position of president, a member of the other faith will always be the vice-president. And what of his own relationship as a Christian missionary with the surrounding Muslim population? “We had some very good friends who were Muslims,” he affirmed. “We helped them and they helped us. Do you remember our day guard and gardener, Huseini? He is a Muslim.”

### *Rafiki Huseini*

“Jambo Mzee Huseini!” Katie and I call through the back of the truck windows, as my grandparent’s groundskeeper opens the gate to allow us passage from the house out to the dusty road. Huseini smiles widely because we are children. He also calls back “Jambo,” the shortened version of the greeting “Hujambo,” chuckling to himself as we drive away. Today we were

meant to find a water park, to feel at home through the juxtaposition of cement and plastic against this barren East African landscape. After becoming remarkably lost, we wind up at a semi-private beach on the Indian ocean. My mother is more wary than usual, because two feet to our right is a sign that reads: "NOTICE – IT IS DANGEROUS TO GO BEYOND THIS POINT FOR THUGS MIGHT ROB YOU WHILE YOU ARE SWIMMING. LEAVE PROPERTIES INSIDE THE GATE." My sister and I have stripped to our bathing suits, we run headlong towards whitecaps. The waves are intimidating, they slap into our thighs as we make a game of standing our ground to the direct attack. The waves do not want us here, and we laugh because we think we are stronger, we laugh until one blast gets the better of us and we fall, and tumble, submerged, gasping when we reach the surface again, sand and salt burning our eyes and coating the insides of our mouths. When we return to my grandparents' home, Huseini is still working. While opening the gate he winks at us and smiles. The sight of his strong, blinding teeth is much more welcoming than whitecaps.

*In July 1999, police used tear gas and clubs to disperse a peaceful demonstration by Muslims protesting a government ban on Muslim school uniforms in public schools... In February 1998, police arrested a popular Muslim leader for violating this law, which triggered widespread riots in the Mmwembechi area of Dar Es Salaam. Police opened fire on the protesters, killing three persons and wounding several others. Approximately 200 Muslims were arrested. There are reports that police tortured and sexually humiliated a group of Muslim women arrested during the riots and forced them to sing Christian songs while in custody.*

*-International Religious Freedom Report 2000*

### *To Frown And Look The Other Way*

Today we have driven to a small church built from sticks and mud. The congregation, my grandmother tells me, built this church themselves, and will walk for miles from the nearest village to attend worship here. Soon we see three African men, one woman, and at least ten

children, smiling, laughing, and excited to be in the presence of one another. Hoping to be in the presence of God. I sit with Katie and my parents, and exchange smiles with children who come in, chattering excitedly in Swahili. “Kwaheri!” they call, which means ‘many blessings’ or, more generically, ‘welcome.’ “Asante!” we call back, giving our thanks and effectively exhausting our knowledge of the Swahili language. The benches here are logs, they are uncomfortable and I squirm through the duration of the service. My grandfather preaches in Swahili, so I am lost but for the constant careful translation of my grandmother, sitting next to me. Afterwards we return to the dusty landscape outside, adults disperse to walk back home. Village children ride with Katie and me in the back of my grandparents’ all-terrain truck. The ride is bumpy, hot. We collide with one another, laughing each time, sticking to each other because of sweat. We make eye contact and smile. We do this because it is what children do naturally – before they are taught to frown and look the other way.

## August

Louisiana can drain you of strength, resolve, self-assurance, faith itself. Which is maybe why there exists such spiritual polarity; why faith (mostly) consists of either Louisiana Voodoo or Catholicism. Some need mysticism to account for the night-noises that rise from the swamp, drumbeat in your dreams. Some need the straight line to walk away from such superstitions. They need the promise of redemption, of rest after toil, of a goddamn breeze. Or maybe I read too much into everything, this being no different.

I went to Slidell to help with hurricane relief a year after Katrina. I went, more selfishly, to find out who I was. Instead I found stagnancy, I found beer and cigarettes on the porch while we sweated and waited for work. I found brief moments of heroism followed by days of reflection. You can lose your mind, in the bayou. But I was more worried about losing my soul.

If you go, and don't rule it out, you will sweat more than you knew a person could sweat. You will put on a t-shirt and shorts in the morning and go to the job. When you come home for lunch at 11:30, sticky and plastered with drywall, you will change into another t-shirt and another pair of shorts. You will learn to live without a bra. And eventually, you will learn to live without changing at lunch (or dinner) because you run out of clothes too quickly and have no money to do laundry. If you are not a drinker, you will become one. If you don't smoke, you will wish you did. You will become accustomed to chaos and disarray. You will no longer expect the plumbing to work, the windows to have glass in them, or the streets to be operational. You will lose your strength to find a different kind.

Jason was the one who met me, my first day at Bayou Liberty Relief. Jason, the ordinary man from Ohio, mid-30s but still boyish. Genuine. He listened to acoustic folk and wondered

what he would do after he left camp. Sometimes he stared off into the distance, lazily scratching one of the camp's many resident dogs behind ratty ears, seemingly unaware that he was doing it. I told him he should listen to Denison Witmer, "Philadelphia Songs." I told him I wanted to change the world. "Not much to do around here," he said, "but you'll get used to it."

And then came Luke, perhaps the biblical "beloved Physician," medicine of choice being weed (but he wouldn't say no to cocaine). He walked up from the house to shake my hand with a wary half-moon, ripe purple and glazed around his left eye. He said he fell out of a moving vehicle, which I would have believed but for the absence of marks anywhere else on his body. Luke meant well. Full stop.

Tony didn't come to meet me, but he was no less welcoming when I found him drinking a beer, barefoot on the porch of his RV. Tony had been with Bayou Liberty Relief for "too damn long" and his feet itched for another home. He had three. One was in Pennsylvania, with his blood family. The other was on The Farm, a commune in West Tennessee, with his spiritual family. And the third, although I heard little about it, was on Oglala Oglala, the Lakota name for Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota. Tony had built a sweat lodge (Inipi) on property to remind him of home. He built the dome from sticks and covered it with blue and green tarps, to keep out the weather, laughing and calling it a "poor man's sweat lodge." I never found out if Tony had any blood-relation to the Lakota people, but the way his eyes sparked and wandered when he spoke of them, I had no doubt they were his kin.

I pitched a tent away from the main house. It became my home for a good five days before the heat at night kept me up too much and I sheepishly relocated my sleeping bag to the floor of another building. This new home was the size of a large cabin and housed two



bedrooms, a kitchen that was less than up to code, and a slightly larger bathroom than the one in the main house. The solar-power was a nice attempt, but couldn't even gather enough energy during the day to keep a box fan on all night. Nevertheless, waking up soaked in sweat near a bathroom beat waking up soaked in sweat and afraid to leave my tent to pee because I was paralyzed by the night noises, real or imagined. Drumbeats in my dreams.

But there were day drumbeats of a different kind. Some weekends, a group of neo-hippy volunteers from New Orleans would come across the bridge to Slidell to participate in a sweat lodge with us. As the sun sank they drummed, smoke, drank, laughed, and eventually lapsed into silence heavy as the humid air. Their eyes were tired. Luke told me most of them had been in the bayou for at least a year, drifting, establishing semi-permanent residency at camps in the Gulf Area. Maybe because they refused to leave until they saw a change. Maybe because the food and rent were free. I sat in the circle with them, as Tony prepared the hot rocks for Inipi. I sat with them, wrapped in a towel like the rest of them, but they did not see me. I was not sure if I wanted to be seen.

Although we were all wrapped in towels, most people stripped of them upon entering the darkness of the lodge. This was symbolic of birth and the womb, and was also apparently just a heck of a lot more comfortable. I couldn't bring myself to be so bold and clung to my towel like a security blanket. I became an expert, however, at surviving the sweat lodge, just not through intense meditation or spiritual awakening. Since I was usually ignored, unseen, I would slip quietly to the back when we entered the lodge, turn so my feet faced the hot rocks at the center, and pull up on the tarp at the bottom just slightly. It was night, so no light was let in to give me away, and I pressed my nostrils to the earth outside, taking deep breaths of cool air. Because of

this I could stay in the sweat as long as Luke or Jason – even Tony. It became my personal badge of honor. I had not found a way to stand out since I had come to Louisiana. I had not written a song since I arrived. I had not improved at sanding drywall or screwing in sheet rock. Even the dogs didn't love me any more than they loved the weekly visitors. Part of me wanted to scream, "when does something happen?" Part of me wanted to scream, "listen to me, I have something to say, I am different." But the group from New Orleans had no time for a skinny boy-girl from the north, and so I mastered the art of passing unnoticed through the night, weaving my way around the crowd and entering the sweat lodge first every time. I no longer feared the night noises. I could out-maneuver drums.

My last sweat at Bayou Liberty relief came on a night which was perhaps the hottest yet. The skies had teased us with promises of rain for three days but hadn't yet relented. I had lost any sense I may have once had of the sweat as a prayer ceremony, and pushed half of my face outside and into the earth as Luke brought in the hottest rocks yet. "O Mitakuye Oyasin," said Tony, calling on the ancestors. "Mitakuye Oyasin" was also uttered when one had had too much and needed to leave the sweat for emotional or physical strain. Whenever someone called out, everyone was expected to leave the lodge, out of solidarity. After a few minutes, one of the girls from New Orleans called out "O Mitakuye Oyasin!" and the first round ended. I observed the group from a few feet away as they splashed water from cups on one another and finally goaded each other into the river nearby. I was *not* going in there. I may have lost my fear of the night noises, but crocodiles were another issue entirely. I turned my back to the laughter and returned to the lodge.

But something had happened. I thought everyone had been in the river, but somehow most of the group had returned to the sweat lodge before me. I couldn't worm my way to the

back this time, in fact, the only spots left to sit or crouch were right next to the burning rocks themselves. Tony closed the flap on the door, and began a second round. I closed my eyes and tried to pray.

It was miserable. How did people do this? Each breath seared my lungs and it felt as if flame literally licked at my nostrils. Sweat beaded off my forehead and ran into my eyes. It stung them, blinded me, eventually found my lips, making me me grimace and choke. I moved back. There was someone there. To the side. Someone there as well. I clutched my towel and pressed my face to the earth. The dirt was sweet, and cool, initially, but I could not sustain the heat. It rose around me, pushed at me. I could hear laughing in my ears...

“O Mitakuye Oyasin!” shouted a voice and before I realized it was mine I had burst from the lodge, flung myself from the womb and into the grass and the swamp, to the edge of the river. I had been invisible to many, but Tony would say we are never invisible to the spirits. Never invisible to our ancestors. I left my towel behind me and dove.

Wrong.

That’s not how it happened.

My journal from this day corrects me: I stayed behind after everyone had left the sweat, trembling along the back wall, punishing myself for my insolence. Then I slipped quietly out and went just as quietly to bed. It is funny how our minds can change history. Muffled drumbeats of imagined warriors haunt my dreams.

## September

*Looking over shoulders we missed  
what rested achingly at eye level. Now,  
with groaning exasperation, we solve  
this perfunctory puzzle in reverse order,  
saving her prefatory piece until what  
seems like, shouldn't be, mimics The End.*

*He needs to know his mother's laugh.  
Seven months new, two months early,  
born of worry rolled in human secrecy,  
loved strangely with countless human words.  
This child will bear the bitter tears of the lost  
whether or not he comprehends his symbolism.  
This child will bear nothing more than  
the watery weight of a world called home.*

It took us six weeks to realize she had never returned to college after summer vacation. A little poking around, a few phone calls made to other people who *had* returned (we hadn't noticed that, either) and we were blinded by the reality of the situation. "Pregnancy," we heard. "Coma." We were nineteen. What did we know of such things? The Artist was our leader, and she said "Her boyfriend knew she was pregnant, and he didn't tell the doctors when she went into a coma? He's an asshole." Sue still believed in God, at this point. "Maybe he was scared," she offered. Michael, who called himself Buddha, was not Buddhist at all. "Honey," he said, "inaction due to fear still makes you an asshole." Sue shot him a dirty look. "No," she countered. "It makes you human."

The baby was fine, doctors said, they had performed an emergency c-section on Jenn while she was still unconscious and then she stayed that way, waiting, in a blank hospital room while her son was taken away and cared for by her family. I imagined him, in her, submerged in water, paddling circles in her swollen womb, being lifted out gently without the effort and

adventure of childbirth. If he had no chance to bond with his mother, asleep, below him, as he ascended from the warmth of womb and into cold, drying light, how would he recognize her if she came around?

“Should we go see her?” one of us asked, and The Artist, who was our leader, said “If she wakes up.” We nodded. That made sense. “Do you think she’ll wake up?” asked one of us. The Artist said, “I don’t know.” We were walking across campus after dark because we couldn’t sleep. Sue still believed in God, but she’s not the one that stopped us, by the fountain, and said that we should pray. That was The Artist, although I couldn’t believe my ears. “Jenn and I used to sit at this fountain and take shrooms together,” said The Artist, and I smiled, remembering the day I had to baby-sit the two of them all afternoon because they were convinced they’d found a paradise lost. “Come home!” they’d shouted, when they called me. “Where’s home?” I asked nervously, to which came the repetitive reply, “Come home! *Come home!*” I think eventually I deduced they were at the fountain due to the splashes in the background. When curiosity got the better of me, I hurried over and found them there, laughing. Sunburnt. Barefoot. “To which all life returns!” The Artist had shouted, gesturing to the water. “We are all going to go to jail,” I thought.

Once again we stood at the fountain, shifting nervously from foot to foot. “I’m serious,” said The Artist, our leader. “Let’s pray.” Sue still believed in God so she went to the edge of the fountain first and slowly dipped her fingers in black water, upsetting reflections of moonbeams. When she sat on the edge of the fountain, when she rested on cold concrete, her ankle-length skirt billowed out around her. She closed her eyes and prayed. Michael, who called himself Buddha and was not Buddhist, sat next to Sue and looked out towards the road, then looked at

the sky, then looked at his hands. “Goddess...” he began, softly. The Artist, who was our leader, had never expressed much interest in divine intervention. She was too tough for religion. She was too tough for other *people*. Now she turned away so that I wouldn’t see the tears forming in her eyes. I don’t know who The Artist prayed to. I kicked off my flip-flops, sat on the edge of the fountain, and gingerly placed my feet in the font. When I tried to think about Jenn I felt cold, and fearful. So I looked instead at my friends, praying, and felt a surge of love for them. I felt a surge of love and respect and gratitude for their lives, warm and vibrant. Jenn once said, “Sit by the pool of learning. Live life with fire and zest. But be grounded. And be free like the wind...all will work out.” Everything Will Be Okay. When I looked to the stars I felt as if they were bucket-sized drops of water, rushing towards me, headlong, through the night.

A few days later the call came in from Michael, who called himself Buddha. “She’s awake,” he said, and I said, “Should we go see her? Yes, yes. Of course we should go see her.” The Artist, who was our leader, was in charge of organizing. But half-prepared plans never worked with everyone’s schedules, and I wondered what we might have said, anyway, had we gone. Jenn had been in a coma for six weeks, and out of those, we had only known and fretted for the last. The baby was seven months old when they delivered him, in August. “That means she was pregnant last spring,” The Artist said. “Jesus. She didn’t tell us. Why didn’t she tell us?” We didn’t know. The Artist looked sick. We called Jenn to ask how she was recovering, and then once more, a week later, to see how she was doing with the baby. “He’s perfect.” She said. “I’m exhausted. When are you guys coming to visit?” She pleaded. “Soon,” we said. “As soon as we have time.”

Yesterday I tried to call her. It’s been two years and her number has changed.

## October

*"There, but for the grace of God, go I."*

*-John Bradford (1510-1555)*

Natalie was there a minute ago, on the other end of the phone, and now she's gone, actually gone, and I'm not sure how I feel about that. I didn't mean for it to come to this. I didn't mean to give up on this, on us, just because I couldn't be around her. It's hard to be in a relationship with someone who's not physically there. But sometimes it didn't seem like she was anywhere at all.

I am walking to the village to buy cigarettes. I've started smoking because everyone at the coffee shop does, and I haven't made any friends at university yet except the people in my dorm. I guess asking for a lighter is a good way to start a conversation. I'm not really addicted or anything, but I like smoking. I like the feel of it, and the smell of it. It's like incense. Like a burnt offering that I take in and reflect upon. I've always wanted to say that to somebody who if they told me not to smoke because my body is a temple. I bet the line of reasoning would work if I got a tattoo as well – would having the most ornate temple make me an idolater? Worshipping my created images instead of The Almighty? I'd ask Natalie, but she's not on the line anymore, and besides, she never believed in God to begin with.

October this year is gorgeous, still warm and breezy, and I haven't lost my excitement at people watching just yet, but I'm awfully lonely. I saw a girl with dreadlocks at the coffee shop yesterday. She wears all black and a scowl, and looks like somebody I wouldn't have messed with in high school. I heard her name is Grace. Because of this, because she looks like my complete opposite, because she is her name's complete opposite, I want to kiss her. I am looking

for complete opposites. Which is why I broke up with Natalie, I guess. Because I was looking for opposition. Or because I want something tangible.

I didn't mean for it to come to this, but anything without care will wither and fade. I had begun to take Natalie for granted, I had begun getting irritated if she wasn't online when she said she would be, if she couldn't call as often. I wanted love letters. I wanted to kiss her. I couldn't, so I wanted to find someone that I could.

A young guy in basketball shorts holds the door open for me at the gas station and I smile. Going up to the counter, I ask the attendant for a pack of Marlboro Reds. She asks to see my driver's license as if she won't believe I'm eighteen even when I show it to her. I dig around in my "trying too hard to be a hippy" purse and pull it out. I have often wondered why I carry this purse. I hate purses. The cashier coughs and hands me smokes. I pay her and mentally wish her well. Maybe Grace will be at the coffee shop. Maybe she will ask me for a cigarette.

It's a funny thing, grace, when we view it as mercy. Leniency. Favor. We live our lives trying to remain protected within the shrouded grace of what we've been told is God, but don't realize it doesn't matter in the slightest who we are or how hard we pray. We don't determine our luck – and we *don't* determine God's leniency towards us. I am walking to the coffee shop from the gas station. I could be hit by a bus. I could have a heart attack. I could find a quarter. I could run home and call Natalie and fix this. Fix everything. But I have lost faith in us. And I have fallen to Grace.

It is growing dark. I have been sitting here chain-smoking and drinking house coffee for hours, watching people filter in and out in the steadily waning light, watching people flirt and



trip and drop their cell phones. I have been leaving quarters for others to find. I hear a voice call from my left and look over. It is Luke, from high school. I didn't know he even went to this college. I haven't seen him for at least two years. He says there is a poetry reading tonight, that is why angsty students from the English department are setting up a stage to my right with microphones and a lone, sad speaker. I imagine everyone wearing berets and sunglasses and finding my quarters. Luke asks if he can sit with me and I make room at my table, glad for the company. After we listen to an hour's worth of poetry about the futility of life and establishment, I see dreadlocks coming towards us, two sets. Grace's are dark and black, and her happier looking companion has shorter, blond ones. Luke sees them coming and speaks excitedly to the blond girl. Apparently they had a class together last semester. Grace looks at me and nods, half smiles. I can barely think straight and finally Luke remembers to introduce me to his friend, and to Grace. Grace has a paper due in the morning and she doesn't have a computer. I hear myself offering her mine, offering her my roommate's printer because mine is busted, offering to take her back to my dorm room where she can work on her project. She sizes me up for longer than I like and agrees.

My roommate is out of town and I am walking with Grace, who is much less ominous than she originally seemed. We climb all acceptable trees on our way back to the dormitory, and I watch South Park while she works on her paper. When she finishes, we watch it together. She has never seen South Park. She has never owned a television.

After an hour she asks me what else I want to do, and since I am caught up by climbing trees and watching South Park, I say I want to kiss her. I say I want to kiss her because my last relationship, my first with a girl, was long-distance from another country and we never met so I never knew what it was like to kiss another woman and I still don't, so really it's kind of nerve-

wracking to even bring this up and... Grace is interrupting me and we are kissing in my dorm room in the middle of the night while my roommate is away. Grace is kissing me and I am wondering what this would have been like with Natalie, I am wondering why the phone isn't ringing and why Grace isn't making me feel better, safer. It turns out I will date her for a month, disregarding safety, because I am captivated by her darkness, as well as her light, and because she is here, in front of me. I can touch her. I am currently captivated by the tangible.

Sometimes I smoke cigarettes at four in the morning because I have slept very little since I got to college. Tonight there is a train rolling by a few miles away. I will grow used to trains. I used to like smoking because it symbolized incense, burnt offering, prayer. Now I like smoking because I am addicted, because Grace told me about a week ago that our relationship would never be monogamous, and should probably end since monogamy is what I want from her. She doesn't ever practice monogamy, she says, she doesn't believe in it. I don't believe in grace. I shiver, a fully mental reaction. It is not actually that cold, but bare trees mean winter and tangible freeze. Natalie is gone. Grace is gone. I watch smoke billow up past branches which have lost most of their leaves. I make no offering. I smell no incense. But I am captivated by wisps of gray dancing amongst tree branches. It's a funny thing, grace, when we view it as elegance and search no further for meaning.

## November

*"Every fist contains my love." – Shi Dechao (Shaolin monk)*

### **Traditional Celtic Phrase**

*An áit a bhfuil do chroí is ann a thabharfas do chosa thú.  
Your feet will bring you to where your heart is.*

There is a pervasive Eastern concept which Judith Lasater delineates in "Living Your Yoga: Finding The Spiritual in Everyday Life." The emotions of attachment and aversion, she says, "raga" and "dvesha" are not opposites, as they would tend to appear. Rather, they are derived from, if not manifested as, the same thing. Anthropologist Helen Fisher studies a similar phenomenon, using the terms love and hate instead of attachment and diversion. She shares Elie Wiesel's theory that "The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference." Under such a definition, I am in love. Who, then, becomes the source of my unbridled passion? Well, I am not indifferent towards my roommate. Of course, I'm also not indifferent towards relatives, classmates, friends, famous musicians, artists, religious figures... or towards God Him/Her/Itself. Still, imagine the reaction I would have received if, upon hearing "I love you" slither serenely from the mouth of my latest, greatest girlfriend, I had responded with "Well, I... am not indifferent towards you." Back up the U-Haul, boys.

The first time I loved, I found myself in a similar situation. At barely eighteen years of age, words like "I love you" can be quite dizzying, so we replaced them with the much more intimate and meaningful, "I opposite of hate you." But Helen Fisher doesn't think hate is the opposite of love. And now I agree.

Love and Hate are far too close of kinfolk to be opposites. They are allies, co-pilots, flying a solitary reconnaissance plane over potentially dangerous territory. When caught in

enemy fire, they discover a single parachute on board. There's always only one parachute.

Sometimes Love jumps to safety. Sometimes Hatred. On occasion they jump together, reaching the ground bruised, irritated, but intact.

Today, Hate and Love and I are going to visit a girl named Ali, who we've been dating for about three weeks. She is bright, energetic, and she speaks for herself. She sings country songs into her hairbrush and quotes Rumi in elegant, long-winded love letters. She has recently informed the three of us that she believes in a God who is sometimes wrathful to the point of denying salvation to entire subsets of humanity (i.e. Jews, Wiccans, etc.). She holds no grudge towards any of these people, but believes God might. This does not sit well with Love, Hate, and me. We are Universalist Episcopalians (with a pinch of existentialism for flavor).

Hate thinks we should let Ali go. That she is not worth our time. Love is glassy-eyed and overcome with optimism, believing that we will be able to work around such differences. As for me? Well, it is safe to say that I am not totally indifferent.

I used to like November. Now, trudging across frozen grass towards a foreign dormitory that I may very well be denied access to, Hate reminds me that even the warmest stocking caps can allow drafts up, up, up and into soft, pink ears, made more vulnerable to attack by a childhood riddled with ear infections. I run a gloveless hand across the itchy wool headgear, and tug on my zipper. Love bounces around my feet, apparently unaware of the cold. She chatters on excitedly about how nice it is to sit with someone special by a window and watch silver-dollar-sized snowflakes meander groundward. "It's not *snowing*." I grumble, before I realize that it actually is; fast flurries have begun to tease around trees and arms and stocking caps, and

lodge themselves shakily in the most irritating of locales, such as my eyelashes. I thrust my chin up, up against the cold. I pretend I am in Vancouver, or the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, or Alaska... yeah, Alaska... I've lost my sled dogs and my snow shoes and I have over a thousand miles to hike before I reach any kind of civilization. I have a thousand mile trek to make, on foot, surviving solely on courage and indifference.

I'm about to call Ali's cell phone when I see her ahead of me, leaving the dorm. Hate thinks she has an awfully cocky swagger. We don't like cocky. Love thinks it was no coincidence that the girl and I arrived on this icy lawn at the same time. I'm leaning towards siding with Hate, when Ali glances up and sees us, and her damn genuine smile sends me spinning towards Love, who is currently sitting in lotus position on the lawn, attempting to weave promise rings out of frozen blades of grass.

"Where are you headed?" I ask. Good way to start things off. Unassuming.

"The Blood Drive. Thought I'd donate," she responds.

Hate makes gagging noises and pantomimes his own hanging. At this point, I'm trying to block him out, but I can't avoid hearing some strangled whisper about "brown-nosing" and "guilt-trip." Love, on the other hand, has dropped her weaving attempts, and is gawping up at Ali as if Ali has just said she is on her way to sacrifice her own life for the salvation of humanity (with the possible exception of the Jews and the Wiccans). I smile contritely, say I'll accompany her, and apologize for having been a douche-nozzle during our religious "misunderstanding." I'm genetically predisposed towards both my mother's temper, and my father's uncanny knack for finishing an argument by prostrating himself before whomever has taken offense at his words

or actions. And, since Ali and I haven't known each other long enough to enjoy holding grudges, we stuff our hands in our pockets to block the cold, give each other sparkle-eyed half nods, and walk on.

The Blood Drive is taking place inside a dark and echoing auditorium near the center of campus. As we enter, I am mauled by a thousand nursing students who all want to know if I'm giving blood. Once, in high school, I passed out while having my finger pricked to check my iron count. I shake my sorry head, mutter, "no," and follow Ali.

We're waiting waiting waiting for her turn, and we're not saying much. Love and Hate have fallen asleep under my chair, curled into each other like littermates. At least they're getting along. Finally, a sour-faced woman calls Ali forward to donate. I stand awkwardly beside the donation station until Ali rolls her eyes at my squeamish face, and nonverbally gives me concrete permission to go outside and have a cigarette.

Love and Hate follow me, yawning, recovering from their naps. It's still snowing out, and I can't tell if I'm seeing second-hand smoke curl gracefully from my mouth, or my own breath, crystallized. I sigh.

"How ya doin'?" Hate asks immediately.

"Leave her alone," Love protests.

I brush them both off and consider, again, what I've gotten myself into. I've barely begun thinking when I realize they're probing my thoughts, trying to find any weaknesses to prove their own points. Hate is tugging on my left pant leg, pleading with me, saying, "You can't possibly expect to be happy over a long period of time with someone whose beliefs are so

*radically different* from your own!” Love, meanwhile, has found her footing on the edge of the ashtray to my right. “Anam Cara,” she says, gazing into my eyes. “It’s Celtic. It means ‘Soul friend.’ To have a soul friend requires work and compromise.” Hate scoffs, “Don’t you think your Anam Cara would, oh, I don’t know, *not be a fascist Nazi?*”

“*Shut up!!!*” I yell, leaving them both with eyebrows raised. “This is not the end-all-be-all! We. Are. Just. Dating.” And that’s when it hits me: we’re just *dating*. I’ll go inside and help Ali to a chair when she’s done giving blood, so she can rest. I’ll bring her cookies and juice boxes, brush her hair behind her ears, tell her I’m proud of her for saving a life... but I’ll do it simply. Maybe even indifferently. Not because I don’t care, but because at this young age, and in this young relationship, I’m not yet expected to understand or cope with raga and dvesha, with love and hate, with their entanglement and compromise.

Judith Lasater says, “if you love someone, you think about her all the time. If you hate someone, you think about her all the time.” David Wilcox once sang, “When you lay your dreams to rest/You can get what’s second best/But it’s hard to get enough.” I fear that I have become jaded towards love, towards my own faith. Like my father before me, I wonder if I will always resort to leaving my dreams at the door, entering life open-armed, apologetic, indifferent.

## December

“Patience,” we learn from t-shirts, advertisements, and the venerable Veggie Tales, “Is a virtue.” It has never been an easy one for me. Growing up in the Episcopal Church, this was especially apparent to me during the liturgical season of Advent – the four Sundays before Christmas Day. Advent is about God’s promise to send a savior son to His people. And so we are joyous, and so we wait. During countless Advent services of my youth, my parish priest talked fervently about this longing, about anticipation. In Sunday school, his wife passed out lyrics to Amy Grant’s “Breath of Heaven” and discussed the abstract concept of spiritual patience with a handful of (mostly) half-interested and easily distracted adolescents. I looked forward to the season all year.

The idea of waiting for the Christ-child was intriguing and compelling to me. It gave the sometimes stuffy (and always structured) Christianity I was familiar with an air of magic, of time suspended. It allowed me to attempt to slow the pace of my own life. For one month out of the year I equated this patience with internal peace (the opposite of my constant anxiety) and my mantra became “Jesus is coming, don’t panic.” If it didn’t work, that was okay, I could always try again, and eventually the feeling would settle, the joy and wonder and longing became a part of me, and I of them. And so I was joyous. And so I waited. As I grew older and left the Sunday school and eventually the church, introducing patience to anticipation became near impossible – I no longer knew what it was that I was supposed to be waiting so patiently for. And even the soothing words of Amy Grant can’t appease the panic derived from having, then losing, sight of a savior.



A couple of years ago I was driving home from college for the holidays when I was confronted with just how much my patience level had deteriorated from childhood's "try, try again theology." I drive a 1996 Volkswagen Golf. Despite the auto's age, at the time it was nearly a new car because I'd had to replace every system, belt, hose, nozzle, and doohickey under the hood. Once, at the least. On this particular drive home, I was living happily wrapped up in the delusion that nothing else could go wrong when I failed to avoid an ominous looking pothole. Within seconds, red was lighting up my dashboard. I don't know much about cars. I knew enough to understand that this particular warning light, as well as a gauge on the left side of the console, roughly translated to "I am uncomfortably hot right now. Love, Your Engine." I pulled over, opened the hood, and called my younger sister. In high school, my friends used to refer to her as "Auto Mechanic Barbie."

"What does it mean when my engine is overheating?" I asked politely while I absolutely *did not* sulk or loathe the fact that I needed her help with something. "It means your engine is overheating" she barked, frustrated that I had interrupted a game of beer pong, or date with the older guy from Theta Chi who totally spent the whole time checking her out at that last toga party. "No... I mean... how do I fix it?" I tried again, through gritted teeth. "Fill your coolant tank." And then she had disconnected the line, and probably flitted back to the much more interesting and obviously less tragically un-cool people she was currently socializing with. Cars raced by me, spraying ice and slush insultingly. So I put my phone in my pocket, faced my engine, and wondered aloud, "What's a coolant tank?"

If mine were a "normal" family, the next call would have been made to AAA and soon I'd be sitting in a heated mechanic's garage. My mother's view towards car reparation, however, is, "why pay somebody when we've got your father?" Sounds cruel, but they've saved an

impressive amount of money this way. I called my parents' house looking for my Dad. No answer. They had a cell phone, but unfortunately it was always with my mother, and there was no guarantee she'd be anywhere near my father. I called it anyway. She was at work, and could under *no circumstances* drive the United States Post Office Official Mail Delivery Truck all the way to Silver Lake to get me and there was no reason for me to be calling her at work in the first place when I knew she was busy. "Right." I said. "It's really cold out." She sighed, said, "I'll call Pam," and hung up.

See, what else I'd derived from my conversation with my mother was that my Dad wasn't at home, wouldn't be for hours, and was probably at the lake cottage doing house repairs. The lake cottage, as luck would have it, was about two miles from where I was currently marooned. But didn't have a telephone. Assuming my mother managed to reach her best friend, Pam, it would take *her* a good twenty minutes to drive to the lake cottage (bless her heart) and tell my father of my predicament.

And it really *was* cold out.

Which, in the end, is what made me start to lose it. As more cars drove past me and stared, never offering to help, rarely pulling into the passing lane, I slammed myself back in the drivers' seat and punched around the steering wheel until my hazard lights came on. I mumbled under my breath about how horrid everyone else in the world was, and eventually yelled a few choice swears that I thought would definitely get me feeling right as rain again.

They didn't. God, it was cold out.

I put on a sock hat. And mittens. And lit a cigarette, which I just as quickly extinguished (there was no point in having the window open unless completely necessary). I flipped through my CDs and drank the last of my travel mug of cappuccino, which had become iced coffee. I

opened my glove box, and out fell a book I'd found at the Philosophy Club Book Sale or in a "free" box somewhere, not that there's much of a difference. It was Anthony De Mello's "Sadhana: A Way To God" and I'd picked it up because of a recent yearning to rediscover my Christian roots without succumbing to conventional Christianity. At the time I had an interest in the concept of meditation in the same way that I had an interest in writing – polite and fleeting. The chapters in this book were devoted to "Christian Exercises in Eastern Form" and I supposed that, just maybe, I could get behind that.

"Sadhana" is an Indian word encompassing multiple meanings, including personal, spiritual discipline and individual ways of approaching God. Most of De Mello's exercises seemed to be in order, the idea being that you would work up to the more spiritually intense and read the book chronologically. But who has time for that? I flipped open to a chapter about breath exercises, something I knew a little about. What I found interesting about these specific exercises was the willingness, almost encouragement, to accept life noises instead of trying in vain to block them out. To hear God in them – to find the joy of Ultimate creation, even in our own flawed attempts at mimicry. Cars raced past me. I relished in the wet sound of spray, of wind, the throat of approaching, then departing engines. Every time my car shook I smiled. And I breathed.

After I'd continued this for an incalculable amount of time, I found the sort of solace I hadn't known since I was actually willing to try, as a child. I felt warm, and calm. I could no longer feel my own hands clasping each other in my lap, could not feel the bucket seat upholstery on my legs, but rather felt that I was a part of all of these things, as they were a part of me. And I was a part of God, just as God was a part of all of these things, and so many other things. And a part of me. My Dad was coming to fix my car. I closed my eyes and waited.

Wind rocked the car and I felt a stirring. I felt I should open my eyes, and so I did. Dad's car was parked just in front of mine. He had pulled to the shoulder of the road, cut the engine, stepped out, and shut his car door, and I hadn't heard a thing. Now he was walking towards me in the wind, smiling, arms outstretched.

These days, when my mind is drawn to Advent, I think about being cold, about breathing and folding my hands. About anticipation and interconnectedness. This year is no different. It is December 12<sup>th</sup>. I'm wandering Chicago O'Hare International Airport at half past three in the morning. My fiancée, Joanna, will be arriving here today after a month-long holiday in Scotland. Her flight is scheduled to arrive with the dawn at 5:15.

My mother has fallen asleep with one eye open and her purse zipped up into her jacket (and probably padlocked to an appendage). A few younger people are doing the same, catching the sleep they can before picking up their own who-knows-whos coming from who-knows-where. Little brown birds chirp and nest in the ceiling of the baggage claim, which is covered in at least two inches of thick, gray dust. Birdsongs are silenced at 4:00 when the janitors come to wax the floors.

You can buy a bagel from a vendor three floors down at the international terminal. You can ride the airport shuttle for free, no one will know you're not really going anywhere (although the lack of luggage is sort of a giveaway). But I will do neither. I am pacing the floors at O'Hare International. I am watching the television screens, watching the flight numbers, specifically hers. Number 1417. Expected Arrival, 5:15. It says. Or it did. I swear it did. Now it says Delayed, Delayed, in large red letters, and finally, Expected Arrival, 6:50. So I walk to the bench where my mother is asleep. I sit next to her, survey the janitors diligently waxing the

floors, wonder when the sun will rise today. In an hour I'll go to lean against the wall by the stairs, because at 6:50 (or 7:30 or 10:59) my fiancée, Joanna, is coming home after a month and a half. December has been long, and cold, but she is coming. I am breathing. And so I wait.

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